A Brief Examination of How US News Media

Creates a False Equivalency of Ideology and Social Theory

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Social theory and ideology both address human actions, behaviors, and ideas. Systems of thought, symbolism, and belief are key foundations of both social theory and ideology. Both seek to address perspective and meaning in the world. Where they differ is the ways in which they analyze and justify their positions.

Social theory is epistemological, analyzing the elements, structures, and systems in society. Hypotheses, experiments, and epistemic research methods explain societies' evolution: how societies form, change, and develop over time. Social theory examines how an ideology or layering of ideologies shape societies (Oxford, 2014).

Ideology is a collections of beliefs and values held by an individual or group, where the justifications for their ideals are not based on epistemic reasoning. These beliefs form economic or political stances and are often seen in ideological "–isms" such as socialism, communism, capitalism, anarchism, fascism, nationalism, liberalism, and conservatism. These bodies of doctrine aspire to explain a worldview and also attempt to evoke a change (Oxford, 2019).

Ideology, by nature, implies that there is an ideal stance or a superior idea. Because the foundation of ideology is not epistemological, there is a lack of introspection within the ideology's reasoning, a void of stepping outside the ideology to see it from a different perspective. Often, ideologies are passed down in families or other groups of people, with a tendency for political or religious ideologies to be similar over generations.

Confirmation bias plays a strong role in ideology. Because of the lack of necessity to interrogate one's views and a desire to prove the ideology's position, confirmation bias easily slips in, favoring the ideology's position.

Social theory studies the creation and influence of ideologies, and how the motivations of ideologies affect society. Social theory allows an individual to step outside of their beliefs to observe why and how people form and choose to be a part of ideologies. Social theory reminds me

of how the Jack Glazier article, "Domain Assumptions of Research," explains how a researcher must examine the ideas, culture, and society one was raised in to be able see themselves, prior research in the field, and their current research as objectively as possible (Connaway, 2017).

News media is a surface-level façade or an overview of current events at best. The news often lends a mouthpiece to two sides equally, when the reality of any issue is much more complex. Although news media is covering more diverse issues than it has in the past, it has kept its coverage methods to binary overviews, often extreme binaries, creating a false equivalency. Rare is the media approach of Democracy Now, featuring lengthy critical discussions with experts on the topics (Democracy, 2019).

At the extremes of the binary are where we may find social theory attempting to confront an ideology, often with limited success. Pundits on news media are ideologues. It's difficult to carry on a conversation with them, they don't want to hear other views, they have their talking points, and they often lack introspection into their ideas. An ideologue does not desire to evolve or grow.

Social theory observes how societies arrive at their current position. Social theory makes educated predictions about the future of the society based on studying the effects of the ideologies and trends in societies over time. Social theory has expertise to give to society on divisive issues like climate change, abortion, and healthcare. False equivalencies would include an expert climate scientist presenting peer-reviewed evidence of years of record-breaking temperatures and natural disasters juxtaposed with a congressperson, who is not an expert in the field, holding a snowball as supposed evidence of no rise in global temperature.

When debating ideologies, social theory confronts a belief system that is often systemic and entrenched in the believer or group holding the ideology. Because ideologies often do not rely on scientific research, ideology possesses this wild card that is often seen as the sly, "Haha! You can't refute this," and this dramatic false equivalency plays well on TV. Equal air time and frequent

confirmation bias are reasons ideology and personal opinion go unchecked and people with entrenched beliefs become obstinate when challenged.

Humans often curate their own confirmation bias on social media by liking and following what they already agree with, creating a media intake that is saturated with like-minded opinions. The mainstream media is not invested in equally dividing air time between the binary issues they've created, as their viewers are likely already aligning their media consumption with their ideologies. Media simply want ratings. Pitting an impassioned ideology against either epistemological research or another impassioned ideology is a recipe for ratings, not fruitful debate or critical thinking.

No one is doubting the fervor and devotion of the ideology of an anti-vaxxer or a staunchly pro-life religious zealot. The issue arises when news media puts these views into a three minute gladiator match against scientific research before they cut to a fast food commercial. Ideologies are based on the inner experiences of an individual or group belief. Because they are based heavily on opinion and belief, ideologies should not be the law of the land.

Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson is often asked about religious believers. He says this only becomes an issue when creationism and intelligent design are forced into the science classroom, or when religious beliefs balk at the idea of being confronted by the scientific method (Tyson, 2015). It's similar to Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's example in her Hobby Lobby dissent: one's right to swing their arm ends just when another person's nose begins (Ginsburg, 2014).

Society has agreed-upon norms for laws and research. Epistemological research has become the accepted scholarly discussion grounds, although news media's agenda of ratings and short time slots mean that they often opt for lower-quality analysis. As social theory records how societies are slowly evolving away from ideologies of misogyny, racism, and homophobia, so too may social theory begin to predict an era in which media sound bytes consistently reflect scholarly research or encourage in-depth coverage that invokes critical thinking and discussion in their listening base.

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